

# MOSHE IDEL

## The Infant Experiment: the Search for the First Language<sup>1</sup>

The search for an alleged primordial language has exerted an unceasing fascination on intellectuals throughout the centuries. Numerous Kabbalists were intrigued by this quest, a subject discussed in the present article, and even modern linguists have attempted to reconstruct the alleged *Ursprache*.<sup>2</sup> That Hebrew was the primordial language was considered self-evident by millions of Jews from the Middle Ages onwards. Having read the Bible, where God is described as resorting to the Holy Language for both creation and revelation, most ancient and medieval Jews naturally concluded from the narrative that the first recorded dialogues in human history took place in Hebrew. This opinion was explicated in Midrashic discussions.<sup>3</sup>

The most articulate and elaborate defense of this position was formulated by R. Yehudah ha-Levi, a twelfth century theologian, who argued forcefully in favor of the perfection of Hebrew. Ha-Levi's aim was to counteract the claims made by Muslims asserting the superiority of the the Koran and Arabic (*arabiyyeh*).<sup>4</sup> It is in this context that

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- 1 This article is part of a larger project dealing with the concept of nature in Kabbalah. It was written with the assistance of the Isaiah Horowitz Foundation.
  - 2 On this issue, see Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct, The New Science of Language and Mind* (Penguin Books, London, 1994), pp. 231 – 261; George Steiner, *After Babel, Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975), p. 474.
  - 3 See the Rabbinic references on this issue collected by Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, JPS, 1968), 5:205 – 6, note 91.
  - 4 On this point see Nehemiah Alony, "The Kuzari – An anti-arabiyyeh Polemic", in G. Blidstein, R. Bonfil, and Y. Salmon, eds., *Eshel Beer Sheva, Studies in Jewish Thought* (Beer Sheva, 1980), 3:113 – 4 [Hebrew]. See also Yochanan Silman, *Thinker and Seer: The Development of the Thought of R. Yehudah Halevi in the Kuzari* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1985), pp. 86 – 89 [Hebrew].

the first arguments to prove the superiority of Hebrew must be understood. However, from the middle of the twelfth century certain Jewish thinkers who addressed the question of the nature of language were less certain about the superiority of Hebrew. Apparently, the authority of the Bible by itself was no longer sufficient to prove the primordially of Hebrew. More experimental proofs were gradually invoked by those who discussed this topic. This reluctance to rely upon the "evidence" of the biblical canon, whose authority was accepted not only by Jews but also by Christians, is a significant departure from earlier, more naive, even credulous attitudes. This evolution owes much to the encounter with the more naturalistic approach characteristic of Greek philosophical and scientific sources as mediated by Arabic language and culture. The Jewish intellectuals who questioned the simplistic belief in the primordially of Hebrew realized that the non-Jewish religious communities surrounding them were unanimous on this point, and this knowledge inhibited them from categorically affirming the preeminence of Hebrew.

Before embarking on a survey of the various Hebrew versions of the so-called "infant story," it is appropriate to point out that the first literary mention of an attempt to establish the first language by experimenting on uneducated infants occurs in Herodotus (*History*, II:2). The same theme reappears in the Middle Ages in the *Chronicle* of Salimbene, which recounts the escapades of Frederick II. By and large, this issue did not attract the attention of Christian authors: for example, when Salimbene describes the experiment attributed to the famous king, he is far more interested in illustrating the cruelty of the monarch than in discovering the identity of the primordial language, although he was not completely indifferent to this question. Perhaps this was because Frederick's "experiment" did not provide an answer to which language came first, Hebrew, Greek, Latin or Arabic (or even supply evidence that a child naturally speaks the language of his parents) since the children died as a result of their inhumane treatment.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See *Cronica Fratris Salimbene, Monumenta Germanicae Historica*, 32:350.

## I. Three Philosophical Attitudes

### 1. Semitic Phonetics as the Original Language

R. Abraham ibn Ezra, the mid-twelfth-century thinker, commentator, astronomer and linguist,<sup>6</sup> had already discussed this issue in the *Sefer Safah Berurah*, one of his numerous writings on the Hebrew language:

So, first I searched to discover which is the first<sup>7</sup> of all languages. Many have said that Aramaic is the more ancient<sup>8</sup> and that it is even in the nature of man to speak it without having been taught by anyone. Further, that if a new born child were placed in the desert with no one but a mute wet nurse to nurse him, he would speak Aramaic. And it is because a child is taught a foreign language that he forgets his natural language. But these words are utterly without meaning, for something learned as a result of chance cannot cause one to forget innate knowledge which is the root. Moreover, the sacred language and the Aramaic one and the Arabic one<sup>9</sup> are one language and one speech.<sup>10</sup>

An excellent linguist, ibn Ezra argued for the resemblance between the three languages by pointing out, for example, phonetic similarities such as the common use of guttural sounds. This exercise in comparative grammar must be understood as a way of corroborating ibn Ezra's theory that Aramaic was the primordial language. However, Ibn Ezra rejects the theory that someone forgets this natural language because he is taught another one. These two points, the first affirming that the three semitic languages share certain common features and the second rejecting the theory of forgetting, stem from ibn Ezra's conviction that language does not consist solely, or even quintessentially, of semantic components but rather of phonetic ones. Let me elaborate on this point by analyzing a passage at the very beginning of the book,

<sup>6</sup> On Ibn Ezra see the recent research printed in Isadore Twersky and J. M. Harris, eds., *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> *Ro'shah*. This may also be translated as "principal language." See also below note 81.

<sup>8</sup> *Qadmonit*. This view has apparently influenced Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim; see Steiner, *After Babel* (note 2), p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> *Leshon toladah*.

<sup>10</sup> *Genesis*, 11:1. *Safah Berurah*, Michael Vilensky, ed., in *Devir* (1924), 2:286.

in fact immediately before the previous citation. Here ibn Ezra discusses the famous passage in Genesis in which Adam names the animals. He remarks that God would not test a stupid person; consequently, we must admit that Adam knew the nature of the animals. At this point, ibn Ezra writes, "He, blessed be He, has planted in man the power to pronounce the sounds."<sup>11</sup> I interpret this as an attempt to explain not only man's capacity to know the nature of things but, more importantly, his ability to express this nature. However, there is a certain fine point made by ibn Ezra: he does not claim that God has planted the faculty of pronunciation in Adam but in man. In Hebrew the difference is quite subtle. Adam is the primordial Man, while *ha-'adam* designates the species of man. Thus, pronunciation, like intelligence, may be understood as characteristic of man as man and not only of the mythical first man. If this is so, then the ability to understand the nature of the things and the power to express this nature cannot be understood as linked to a mythical event in the remote past but as a generic aspect of human nature. Consequently, the phonetic features that the ancient language possesses in common with other languages will not be forgotten by the study of another, somewhat different language. In the context of this discussion ibn Ezra affirms that

all the nations in all the islands, are equal in [their] pronunciation, but are distinguished from each other [only] slightly by the speech [namely utterance] of their sounds in a clear way.<sup>12</sup>

The suspicion that the above discussion of the primordial language is not a naive one inasmuch as it does not accept the mythical view of language presented in the Bible is fostered by a passage at the very beginning of the book, where ibn Ezra declares that "God alone is the first and has no beginning, but all the creatures have a beginning."<sup>13</sup> In Hebrew "the first" is *rishon*, which may be an allusion to *Adam ha-rishon*, the first man, or Adam. Thus, by announcing that only God is the first, ibn Ezra may imply that there is no first man. Indeed such a view is implied in ibn Ezra's long version of the Commentary on Exodus 3:15, where he writes that "*ha-adam* is an adjective and there is a

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

secret in it because he is the name of the species." This view is to be understood as denying the creation of a particular man and affirming the creation of man as a species.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that ibn Ezra conceives of the primordial language as being Aramaic and not Hebrew is of considerable importance. Though this is not a novel opinion,<sup>15</sup> it is nevertheless quite rare in Jewish sources. Thus, ibn Ezra dissents from the more common mythology based on classical sources that Hebrew was the first language. He turns his attention away from texts and focuses instead on the linguistic fact that Aramaic is phonetically similar to both Hebrew and Arabic. A fact to be noted is that Ibn Ezra's *Safah Berurah* was written in Italy or, at least, after the author's visit there.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. Hebrew Phonetics and Semantics

In his correspondence with the philosopher R. Zerahiah ben Shealtiel, the thirteenth-century thinker R. Hillel ben Shemuel of Verona (or, according to another passage, Ferrara) presented the following version of the infant experiment:

If the infant stays for a long period among mute nurses or those who will not speak before him at all, after a while, when the natures<sup>17</sup> [of the child] will emerge and strengthen, he will speak or stammer naturally.<sup>18</sup> Most of his stammerings will be spoken words until he will reach the stage of perfect speech and stop stammering, and the language he will first speak will indubitably be the holy language because it was the first and was given to Adam by [his] nature.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> On this issue see also the view of Abraham Abulafia discussed in M. Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. 114 – 117.

<sup>15</sup> See *Sanhedrin*, fol. 38b and *ibid.*, 21b; Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*, tr. A. Goldhammer, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 1, 12.

<sup>16</sup> According to one scholarly opinion, it was written in Rome in 1174; according to another view, it was composed after his visit there, while the author was visiting France. See Zeev Bacher, *Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra the Grammarian*, tr. A. Z. Rabinovitch, repr. (Jerusalem, 1970), pp. 24 – 5 [Hebrew]. Thus ibn Ezra visited Italy more than a century before Abraham Abulafia.

<sup>17</sup> *Ha-teva 'in*. On the identity of the natures, see below.

<sup>18</sup> *Gingum*. Another possible translation would be "babble."

<sup>19</sup> *Be-teva'*. Cited by Zerahiah ben Shealtiel Hen in his response to R. Hillel, printed in *'Otzar Nehmad*, repr. (Jerusalem, 1967), 2:135. On the polemic between the

This point of view is closer to that of R. Abraham ibn Ezra than to that of Hillel's own student, Abulafia. Hillel believes that an infant is naturally endowed with the faculty of speech, which emerges in the form of stammering but eventually changes into clearly articulated Hebrew. What is crucial for the understanding of Hillel's position is the term "by nature." This differs from the formulation of ibn Ezra – though perhaps not from his intention – which affirmed that God endowed man with the faculty of speech. Thus, the Hebrew language is not revealed by God, but may nevertheless be part of the perfect nature of man. One could conclude from this that for Hillel, like ibn Ezra, it was more a question of perfect phonetics than perfect semantics. The phonetic aspect of language is indicated by the stammering, which marks an initial stage in a process of progressive development. In my opinion, the first stage reflects the confused sounds that gradually become articulated. Although the stammering indicates an initial imperfection that must be overcome, Hillel's statement implies that from the very beginning the phonetic apparatus was structured to generate the sounds of Hebrew. To paraphrase J. B. Sermoneta, the transition from stammering to perfect speech may therefore represent the perfection of the speech organs, described in the quotation as the strengthening of the "natures."<sup>20</sup>

This phonetic interpretation of the passage does not preclude a semantic one as well; the passage should be understood to mean that the sounds produced by the child are not the only ones to correspond to those of Hebrew but that the combination of letters into meaningful words also refers to Hebrew.

two thinkers insofar as language is concerned, see the very important, though hardly accessible, discussion of Giuseppe Sermoneta, *R. Hillel ben Shmuel ben Eleazar of Verona and His Philosophical Thought* (Ph. D. thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1961), pp. 167 – 184 [Hebrew]. On R. Hillel and his controversy with Zerahiah, see also the more general English survey of Isaac E. Barzilai, *Between Reason and Faith: Anti-Rationalism in Italian Jewish Thought 1250 – 1650* (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1967), pp. 33 – 57. See also Umberto Eco, *La ricerca della lingua perfetta* (Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1993), pp. 56 – 58.

<sup>20</sup> *Teva' im*. Cf. Sermoneta's interpretation, *ibid.*, pp. 168 – 169.

### 3. A Jewish Rejection of Hebrew as a Natural Language

As naturalistic as R. Hillel's position was, it nevertheless infuriated his even more naturalistic contemporary, the Maimonidean philosopher Zerahiah ben Shealtiel Hen, originally from Barcelona but a resident of Rome in the 1270s or 1280s. He emphatically rejected the assumption that Hebrew, or language in general, is an integral part of human nature and asserted that a child raised among mute people will not speak at all but rather bark like a dog.<sup>21</sup> He claims that if knowledge of Hebrew was a natural faculty of Adam, everyone would speak Hebrew. His behavioristic approach presupposes that language is learned by imitation and that it is essentially an acquired faculty. Zerahiah does not misinterpret the position of his contemporary; he understands Hillel to mean that the phonetic and not the semantic aspect is natural. Nevertheless he refuses to admit that there are linguistic sounds that would emerge naturally in a totally silent environment.

## II. Three Kabbalistic Positions

The three philosophical discussions studied above reveal similar versions of the infant experiment, and while their conclusions are somewhat divergent, they all tend to a naturalistic understanding of the experiment. Among Kabbalists the situation is noticeably different. In the three Kabbalistic treatments of this theme, which as far as I know are the only passages in kabbalistic literature dealing with this subject, one recognizes three different models of Kabbalah from the different ways in which the experiment is interpreted. Elsewhere, I have attempted to articulate the phenomenological structure of these three major models of Kabbalah.<sup>22</sup> I shall only refer to these here when strictly necessary for an understanding of the different interpretations of the experiment.

<sup>21</sup> *'Otzar Nehmad*, 2:136.

<sup>22</sup> M. Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 45 – 145 and *idem*, "Réification of Language in Jewish Mysticism," in S. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 42 – 79.



# 1. Abraham Abulafia or the Ecstatic Model

During the 1260s a young Jewish adventurer arrived at Capua, south of Rome. His name was Abraham ben Shemuel Abulafia. He was an Aragonese Jew, who had just returned from an attempt to find the legendary river Sambatyon, beyond which the ten lost tribes of the Jews were believed to be waiting for the arrival of the Messiah. Apparently encouraged by the invasion of Mongols in the Near East in the middle of the thirteenth century, Abulafia attempted to reach them in the land of Israel. However, upon his arrival there he learned that these invaders were far from respecting or cultivating rabbinic ritual. Returning to Europe through Greece, where he married, he decided to stop for a while in Italy. There he began to study Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* with one of the most learned thinkers among the Italian Jews, R. Hillel ben Shemuel of Verona. A few years later, we find him back in the Iberian Peninsula, studying Kabbalah in Barcelona in 1270. He not only became a convinced Kabbalist but also the founder of a special form of ecstatic Kabbalah. This differs from the main trend of Kabbalah, which concentrates more on the nature of the divine manifestations, in that it is primarily concerned with the question of language, its nature, and the technique of linguistic manipulation either as part of a mystical practice or as an exegetical device.<sup>23</sup> Shortly afterwards, in 1273, he composed one of his earliest kabbalistic writings, named *Mafteah ha-Re'ayon*, in which language provides the main subject-matter. Dealing with a variety of topics related to language, he also addresses the question of the original language, an issue that will fascinate him for years to come. In this context he adduces a famous story, in fact an experiment to find out what the first language was by preventing an infant from listening to any language. When Abulafia resorted to this story of the infant, he may have been aware of ibn Ezra's book since he had a great interest in issues of lan-

23 On these issues, see Gershom Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic of the Kabbala," *Diogenes* 79 (1972): 59 – 80; 80 (1973): 164 – 94; Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, passim, as well as idem, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988).

guage, and even composed some – for the time being lost – treatises on linguistics.<sup>24</sup> In the *Sefer Mafteah ha-Re'ayon* we read as follows:

[a] Know that for every human being who has come to be, there was a human being who preceded him, and so on until Adam. So, too, be informed that in order for any speaker of any language to speak, there were previous speakers. And if there had not been a language before him, he would never have been able to speak, for such is [human] nature.<sup>25</sup> Observe how many forms and representations and imaginative devices are [used by] human education [in order to] induce a child to speak and become a proficient speaker of a language. [b] And therefore, there is all the more reason to think it absurd to imagine that if a child were abandoned by agreement to be raised by a mute, he would spontaneously learn to speak the holy language. And even if you hear that a particular king conducted this experiment and found this to be the case, [you will not believe it] if you possess reason and perceive truth. ... So, too, concerning the belief that the child was a Hebrew speaker, when in actuality he was a non-speaker. This would be a very good story for we would thereby raise the stature of our language in the eyes of those who hear this story, although it is an entirely false fabrication. In addition, this leads to a devaluation of the language because his proofs are false. In my opinion, it is not wise to use false claims to raise the stature of anything. However, since our language is indeed of a higher quality than any other, but for different reasons, it is therefore called the "Holy Language."<sup>26</sup>

The story of the mute nurse, which might have reached Abulafia from oral traditions relating to an alleged experiment of Frederick II, should be understood on two different levels. The first one is the factual: such a story about a "real" experiment should not be believed because it contradicts reason. As the pedagogical efforts necessary for learning a language – and this includes Hebrew – demonstrate, a spontaneous production of language, both from a phonetic and semantic point of view, belies observation. Thus, the story of the infant experiment cannot generate solid evidence for the priority of Hebrew, even if dissemination of this anecdote serves to enhance the status of Hebrew on false grounds. Abulafia clearly opposes the resort to traditions or stories of this sort.

24 See his claim in "Ve-Zot Li-Yhudah," in Adolph Jellinek, ed., *Auswahl Kabbalistischer Mystik* (Leipzig, 1853), 1:18.

25 *Ha-teva*.

26 MS. Vatican 291, ff. 29b – 30a.

On another level, Abulafia presupposes that every existing conventional language is necessarily derived from a preexisting language. Thus, though ready to acknowledge the conventional nature of all the languages, Abulafia assumes that, logically speaking, an already-existing language must be presupposed. His argument is logical and based on experience, not theology or scripture. Nevertheless, Abulafia is eager to point out that human nature alone cannot reach the level of speaking unless guided from outside. Although equipped with the vocal apparatus necessary for speech, man would not be able to put it into action spontaneously. The importance of the vocal apparatus is mentioned in a very important passage:

But the form which comprises all writing is the "form of speech,"<sup>27</sup> which is natural and adheres to the mouth and is also inscribed in the heart<sup>28</sup> in the moment of formation. And proof of this is the fact that if this<sup>29</sup> is not the form of man, he would not [be able to] speak and the essence of his existence<sup>30</sup> would not be speech. And you know that the quintessence of man is to be a living [and] speaking<sup>31</sup> being; and the form of life is perfected in the senses and the "form of speech" is perfected by the intellect.<sup>32</sup>

As in the case of Abraham ibn Ezra, the vocal and the intellectual components of language are crucial; both are inscribed in human nature from the very beginning, and their perfection constitutes human perfection. Indeed, the fact that Abulafia uses the phrase "form of speech" is significant because it represents a very close parallel to Dante's expression *forma locutionis*, which is apparently not found before Dante.<sup>33</sup> I do not wish to address here the implications of such a striking similarity but simply remark that the two authors, both living in Italy toward the end of the thirteenth century, had recourse to a very similar expression. The two passages cited above were written at

27 *Tzurat ha-dibbur*.

28 *Haquqim ba-lev*.

29 Namely, the form of speech.

30 *Mahut metziuto*.

31 *Medabber*.

32 *Sefer ha-Melammed*, MS. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, 680, f. 296a. For bibliographical details on this book, see M. Idel, *R. Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrines* (Ph. D., Hebrew University Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 15 ff. [Hebrew].

33 See note 59.

a time when Abulafia was not in Italy but apparently in Spain. However, they date from after his first period of study in Italy.

The next citation comes from one of Abulafia's best known works, the *Sefer 'Or ha-Sekhel*, which he wrote in Sicily around 1285:

The human intellect is the mover of all languages,<sup>34</sup> though it is immoveable, either by its essence or by accident. What is meant by this is that the human intellect operates within the human species *in actu* from its side, but *in potentia* from their [the men's] side. And the intellect modified the languages after they had been one entity, understood by all speakers, and today they are still one entity, which is, nevertheless, not understood by all speakers. And the reason for this was the dispersion of the nations, as it is hinted at in the secret of [the pericope of] dispersion, and from [the verse],<sup>35</sup> "So the Lord scattered them," and from [the verse],<sup>36</sup> "The Lord confounded them." When you find one nation in India and the other in Kush, and they are at an extreme distance from each other, and the language of the first nation agrees<sup>37</sup> with its environment<sup>38</sup> while the language of the other agrees with its environment, and one does not resemble the another, and there is no communication between the two, the geographical distance between the two [countries] is responsible for the fact that one nation does not understand the language of the other. And it has already been explained that languages are conventional but that speech is natural and not conventional. And man's nature does not compel him to cause the transition from what is possible *in potentia* into actuality by speech, and [the same applies to] all the faculties, despite the fact that they are possible *in potentia*; and if he does not study them he will never know them forever. They are not like youth and old age, which are *in potentia* but will pass into actuality by necessity with no obstacle to this transition, if there is no absence of this form. Therefore these qualities [youth and old age] will not be attained because of study or exercise but because of nature. On the other hand, the knowledge of the faculties and the understanding of speech are spiritual capacities which need an agent capable of causing them to pass from potentiality into actuality. And if an agent capable of causing the transition is not found, they [the faculties] will not pass into actuality. And because man possesses an intellect *in actu*, he will receive them if he is taught and he will not receive them if he is not taught. And because he compares one topic to another, even if he did not study, it is sufficient for him to see someone who has studied in order to act in a similar

34 See note 40.

35 *Genesis*, 11:8.

36 *Ibid.*, 9.

37 *Muskkemet*.

38 On the affinity between language and geographical environment, see Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 154, n. 99.

way by accident, without studying, or he will combine one action with another and generate a third action, because everything follows a natural course.<sup>39</sup>

This passage has a direct impact on the way we should interpret Abulafia's view of language expressed in the passage dealing with the infant experiment. Here speech is defined as a faculty *in potentia* (in Hebrew *be-koah 'efshari*). It requires either a conscious external agent to teach the infant to speak or a model to imitate, which will allow the infant to project what he sees in a way that will enable him to create his own acts of speech. Therefore, innate as the language capacity is in the infant, it could not be actualized without, at the very least, a model capable of speech. An Innate capacity and the proper environment are therefore both essential if the effectual utilization of language is to emerge. But one might ask, who taught the hypothetical Adam to become a speaking being? The answer to this question is formulated in the passage cited above: the human intellect, or the active intellect within the human species is such a possible agent. This answer is correct in general because according to another statement one learns that the intellect causes the emergence of speech.<sup>40</sup>

However, what is the specific nature of the intellect mentioned by Abulafia in the last quotation? On the one hand, he speaks about the "human intellect," that is to say, the intellect found in the human body. On the other hand, he speaks about the intellect operating within the human species. According to medieval Jewish neo-Aristotelian traditions, influenced by Arabic sources, this is the Agent Intellect, a cosmic intellect conceived of as separated from matter.<sup>41</sup> In the classical formulations of the Arab-Jewish philosophical tradition, found, for example, in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, it would be a contradiction in terms to speak about the Agent Intellect found in matter. However, it seems that the concept used by Abulafia can be understood in the light of a conception of the cosmic intellect which was less widespread among the Jews, a noticeable example of which can

be found in Averroes.<sup>42</sup> In a passage from the *Sefer 'Or ha-Sekhel* that precedes the citation we have been discussing, Abulafia describes the interaction between the separate intellects and the human intellect as follows: "the active intellect, which produces in us an active intellect *in actu*, is the Lord of All the Worlds, not another one of the separated intellects. And if our intellect is the tenth, it is the all<sup>43</sup> and is special because of the First Cause."<sup>44</sup>

Thus, the human intellect can be described as an active intellect. Some lines further on, Abulafia asserts that a guiding principle has to comprise two modalities: a separate modality in relation to the issues with which it deals, so that it does not move together with the things it moves, and an unmovable one, which does not participate in the movement of what is moved.<sup>45</sup> No doubt this is the case with the intellect which Averroes conceives of as being at the same time both a separate spiritual entity and one immersed in matter. Certain passages in Abulafia's writings identify the active intellect with primordial speech,<sup>46</sup> while the biblical revelation or, more precisely, the dialogue between Moses and God is described as the divine use of Moses' voice in order to transform the divine intellectual message into a voiced one.<sup>47</sup> Thus, an ordinary person cannot acquire human speech without a human model such as a speaking nurse, but we can imagine that Adam, either as an historical person or as the human species, could have acquired speech by the virtue of the impact of an intellectual influx upon the organic apparatus. So, for example we learn that "speech, is conceptualized<sup>48</sup> in the intellect, and that the imaginative,<sup>49</sup> appetitive and sensitive faculties are ruled by it. Thus, the intellect commands speech, and speech commands the appetitive faculty, the

42 See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 187, n. 240.

43 *Ha-kol*.

44 Berlin, MS. Or. 538, f. 14b; MS. Vatican 233, f. 10b.

45 Berlin, MS. Or 538, f. 15b.

46 See his "Ve-Zot Li-Yhudah" (note 24 above), p. 16.

47 Idel, *The Mystical Experience* (note 23 above), pp. 55, 65, note 14, pp. 84, 149, note 52.

48 *Metzuyyar ba-sekheh*. On the term *tziyyur* as forming a concept, see H. A. Wolfson, "The Term Tasawwur and Tasdiq in Arabic Philosophy and Their Greek, Latin and Hebrew Equivalents," *The Moslem World* (April, 1943): 1 – 15.

49 *Ve-koah ha-medammeh*.

39 MS. Berlin, Or. 538, ff. 15b – 16a, MS. Vatican 233, f. 11ab.

40 *Sefer Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, MS. München 408, f. 91ab.

41 On the various versions of Aristotle's concept in Arabo-judaic philosophies, see Herbert Davidson's studies printed in several volumes of *Viator* 3 (1972), 17 (1986), 18 (1987) and *Revue des études Juives* 131 (1972): 351 – 396.



appetitive the imagination, and imagination the senses, and the senses move in order to fulfill the command of the intellect."<sup>50</sup> In Abulafia's first book, the *Sefer Get ha-Shemot*, we read that:

All languages are included in the language that underlies them all,<sup>51</sup> i. e. the Holy Language, expressed through 22 letters<sup>52</sup> and five ways of pronunciation<sup>53</sup> ... for there is no speech or writing but this and there are no other letters, for they are holy and this is the *leshon qodesh* [Holy Language], [the consonants of Qodesh being] *Quf Vav Daleth Shin*. This is "theo" in Greek,<sup>54</sup> T(h)YV VYV [*tav vav*], and S(h)NT(h)Y or S(h)NTV in Italian – S(h)YN NVN T(h)YV VYV [*shin nun tav vav*]<sup>55</sup> or TYT(h) VYV [*tet vav*]. In the same way, if you recite any of the seventy languages, you find that its letters are none other than those of the Holy Language, and that all is one and the same, except that this language is available to those who know and not available to those who do not. Pay attention to this exalted matter, for it contains a very great secret derived from the verse,<sup>56</sup> "And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech," and is further indicated in the verse<sup>57</sup> that refers to the Messianic era: "For then will I give to all nations a pure language. And everyone knows that the sixty-nine languages are included in the "Holy Language."<sup>58</sup>

The "Holy Language," which comprises all the others, is not Hebrew in its semantic aspect but rather Hebrew in its more fundamental aspects, namely the consonants and vowels and the principle of the combination of letters, which is one of the major sources for the diversification of languages. Moreover, the combination of letters provides a technique for attaining divine revelation: "the true essence and

50 *Sefer Hayei ha-Nefesh*, MS. München 408, f. 91ab.

51 This is how it appears in the manuscript and apparently the word *me'uleh* (of highest quality), or some such word, is missing. On the first language that included all other languages, see R. Arnaldes' analysis of the opinion of the eleventh-century Cordoverian thinker and linguist, Ibn Hazm, in *Grammaire et Theologie chez Ibn Hazm de Cordove* (Paris, 1956), p. 46.

52 On this issue, see Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 3 – 8.

53 Namely, the five main vowels according to the medieval Hebrew grammar as influenced by Arabic linguistics.

54 QDVSh (*qadosh* = holy) = 410 like the morpheme ThY as in an elliptic spelling of *Theos*, God in Greek.

55 In Italian, *santo* means "holy." From this we derive that the word *La 'az* means (in the context of Abulafia's usage) "Italian."

56 *Genesis*, 11:1.

57 *Zephaniah*, 3:9.

58 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. 1582, f. 105b.

cause of prophecy is the 'word' that reaches the prophet from God by means of the 'perfect language,' which includes the seventy languages."<sup>59</sup> Abulafia emphasizes the natural dimension of human language not to prove that it was revealed by God but to underline that it is an integral part of human nature. It is because it is natural that it is also divine; the two concepts overlap in Abulafia's view.<sup>60</sup> In many ways the ecstatic kabbalist is much closer to the Aristotelian naturalistic position, a fact that clearly distinguishes this kind of Kabbalah from the two other kabbalistic models explored below.

## 2. R. Aharon Berakhiah of Modena and Linguistic Immanence

An interesting version of the infant experiment is found in a famous book of R. Aharon Berakhiah of Modena, the *Sefer Ma'avar Yaboq*, composed in the third decade of the seventeenth century and printed in Mantua.<sup>61</sup> From the point of view of my theory of three structural models of kabbalistic thought, Berakhiah represents the magical, or talismanic model, which considers language part of the natural order and consequently assumes that it is possible to attract divine power by means of various rituals, linguistic or other. This model of Kabbalah, which appears in the late thirteenth century, is well represented in the writings of the sixteenth century Kabbalist, R. Moshe Cordovero of Safed, who had a lasting impact on Aharon Berakhiah of Modena.<sup>62</sup>

Because nature has imprinted this word in the mouth of infants, as mentioned above, the children of the non-Jews also begin by saying *yako*, as mentioned

59 *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, printed by Adolph Jellinek, *Philosophie und Kabbala* (Leipzig, 1854), p. 8; Idel, *R. Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 86 f., 92 f., 96, 98 f., 103. I hope to elaborate elsewhere on the possible importance of this unique status of language as a form of cognition higher than imagination. This conception may have influenced later descriptions of man as endowed with the form of speech, as in Dante, for example. See, Umberto Eco, "Forma Locutionis," *Filosofia* '91, a cura di Gianni Vattimo (Laterza, 1992), pp. 176 – 183; idem, *La ricerca* (note 19 above), pp. 41 – 60.

60 Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 16 – 27.

61 On this Kabbalist, see Isaiah Tishby, *Studies in the Kabbalah and Its Branches* (Jerusalem, 1982), pp. 177 – 254 [Hebrew].

62 See Idel, *Hasidism* (note 22 above), pp. 45 – 145 and "The Talismanic Language in Jewish Mysticism," *Diogenes* 43/2 (1995): 23 – 41.



above.<sup>63</sup> And it is already apparent from the story, that a child who has not heard any language, will speak his first words in the holy language because the master of Nature, who is *Elohim*, the numerical value of which is equivalent to Nature according to *gematria*, has imprinted this on His world by virtue of the secret of the letters of His Torah, which He contemplated when he created the world.<sup>64</sup>

Let me begin with what seems to me to be the most interesting aspect of this passage: God has imprinted the Hebrew letters both on the internal nature of humans and on external nature. The constitution of the world, like that of the infant, is informed by the same divine power. In fact, we may speak about a vision involving a linguistic immanence that permeates all existence, human as well as non-human. Language is not imprinted separately on man and nature; if the correspondence between the names given by Adam to things are significant, it is because he understood the "spiritual power"<sup>65</sup> of the letters" constituting the names that correspond to natural entities.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, the human soul itself is formed out of the holy letters.<sup>67</sup>

The correspondence between structure of the Torah and the structure of the world is an old Midrashic leitmotif, quoted almost verbatim at the end of the above quote.<sup>68</sup> God contemplated the preexisting Torah in order to create the world, just as Plato's demiurge contemplated the world of ideas for the same purpose.<sup>69</sup> The Kabbalist adds another important element to the Platonic model with his emphasis on the letters of the Torah. This allows him to establish a correspondence with spoken language. The inscribing power was designated *Elohim*,

63 See below. The quote is from f. 123b.

64 (Wilna, 1896), f. 124a (first edition Mantua, 1626). For the various Midrashic and medieval sources of this view, see Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 29 – 32.

65 *Ruhaniyyut*. On this concept, which stems from Arabic sources and which exerted a crucial influence on Jewish higher magic, see Shlomo Pines, "On the Term *Ruhaniyyut* and its Sources and On Judah Halevi's Doctrine," *Tarbiz* 57 (1988), pp. 511 – 540 [Hebrew] and idem, "Shi'ite Terms and Conceptions in Judah Halevi's Kuzari," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980): 165 – 251; Idel, *Hasidism*, passim.

66 *Ma'avar Yaboq*, f. 123b.

67 *Ibid.*

68 See also *ibid.*, f. 123b.

69 See note 64.

which in several Kabbalistic sources, including this one, is identified with Nature, because the Hebrew word for nature (*ha-Teva'*) is numerically equivalent to *Elohim*. This equation is very important not only for a more naturalistic understanding of some forms of Kabbalah but also for better understanding the background to Spinoza's famous expression *Deus sive Natura*.<sup>70</sup> The double signature of God on nature and on human speech is interesting from another point of view: it is reminiscent of the famous view of Jacob Boehme, who compares the two signatures and sees them as evidence of the divine presence in the world.<sup>71</sup>

But let us return to the infant experiment. What is the nature of the primordial word *yako*? Its origin had been explained a little bit earlier, where the Kabbalist indicates that

Some few days after their birth, children will pronounce the word *yako*, and this marks the beginning of their speech. In a similar way, women of loose morals [namely prostitutes] are accustomed to say *Aho*. The infant will say *yako* by himself, and it is wise Nature that accustomed him to say this, since he [thereby] blesses himself as he says: *Yasimeni Elohim ke-Efraim u-Menasheh* ("God make me as Ephraim and Menasseh") or *Yasimkhem Elohim ke-Efrayim u-Menasheh* ("God make you as Ephraim and Menasseh"). And he [also] blesses his father and mother who have begotten him.<sup>72</sup>

The word *yako* is therefore conceived of as a *notarikon* of the first letters of Jacob's blessing, and, according to this Kabbalist, by saying it, the infant will bless himself and his parents for begetting him. In her wisdom, nature teaches the infant a respectful manner of behavior. Whether the infant is Jewish or not, he unconsciously possesses knowledge of Hebrew in the case of this word *yako*, which I take to be an onomatopoeic sound. Although innate, we may assume that this word is subsequently forgotten. The Kabbalist twice mentions that the word *yako* is a blessing, and indeed the two formulas are slightly dif-

70 Cf. M. Idel, "Deus sive natura – Les metamorphoses d'une formule de Maimonide a Spinoza," in *Maimonide et la mystique juive* (Paris: Cerf, 1991), pp. 105 – 135.

71 Allison Coudert, "Some Theories of a Natural Language from the Renaissance to the Seventeenth Century," *Magia Naturalis und die Entstehung der modernen Naturwissenschaften: Studia Leibnitiana. Sonderheft 7* (Wiesbaden, 1978), pp. 56 – 118.

72 *Ma'avar Yaboq*, fol. 123b.

ferent versions of the blessings Jacob bestowed on his youngest sons in Genesis 48:20. This formula is used to this day by Jews to bless their male offspring at the entrance of Sabbath. Therefore, the link between the formula and the concept of blessing is obvious and expressly mentioned by the author. We may learn something more about the way this Kabbalist views language by turning to his concept of blessing in the same book. In a very important passage, which reflects earlier Kabbalistic views and could have served as a channel for their transmission to later generations, we read as follows:

"By all His ways," even by the corporeal ones "you shall know Him,"<sup>73</sup> namely the Holy one, blessed be He, and cleave to Him, and He will guide your corporeal ways to His worship, so that you shall attain true happiness.<sup>74</sup> And the blessing that comes with the [performance of] the commandments and of the acts<sup>75</sup> consists in drawing down the spiritual power<sup>76</sup> from the height of the degrees to the *sefirah* of *Malkhut*,<sup>77</sup> which collects all the influxes that she receives from one or another *sefirah*. And this is the reason why it is called the *Kenesset Yisrael* [The Assembly of Israel]. Thereafter, the influx is drawn towards the lower entities, though it is incumbent on us to draw it down [only] to her.<sup>78</sup>

For this Kabbalist, as for Cordovero, the act of blessing is understood as bringing down divine power from the highest of the *sefirot* to the lowest, *Malkhut*, and from there to lower beings. Blessing is therefore not only the expression of a good intention or a traditional formula but a magical and essentially linguistic act. When he blesses himself and his parents, the infant uses one word which is the quintessence of blessing, and there is good reason to assume that the Kabbalist understood its efficacy in talismanic terms.<sup>79</sup> In other words, the

<sup>73</sup> *Proverbs*, 3:6.

<sup>74</sup> *Ha-'osher ha-'amitti*.

<sup>75</sup> *Ha-pe-'ulot*.

<sup>76</sup> *Ruhaniyyut*. See note 68 above.

<sup>77</sup> The last of the ten Kabbalistic *sefirot*.

<sup>78</sup> *Ma'avar Yaboq*, f. 102b. This text is heavily influenced by R. Moshe Cordovero's commentary on the prayerbook, *Tefillah le-Moshe* (Premyslany, 1892), f. 4a; on its contents, see Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 71. Cf. also the view on *Berakhah* in R. Meir ibn Gabbai, *'Avodat ha-Qodesh* (Jerusalem, 1983), f. 39c, and later in, *ha-Shelah* (Jerusalem, 1969) I, f. 22b.

<sup>79</sup> For more on the concept of *Berakhah*, see Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 71.

connection between Jacob's blessing in the Torah and the first sounds made by the infant, understood also as a blessing, may reflect a broader dynamic that ensures the descent of power through the pronunciation of the correct formula. This seems to be implied when the author mentions corporeal worship, namely worshiping God by deeds which are purely corporeal and not related to the Halakha. It is improbable to assume that a kabbalist would consider the formula that is the quintessence of the blessing as merely a way of expressing a wish since in any case the child does not understand the significance of the word *yako*. Thus, if this word is significant, I assume its significance is not semantic but talismanic. Language, namely the perfect language, must operate independently of the speaking agent in order to be effective. While for the ecstatic Kabbalah, language is a means to attain a mystical experience, for the talismanic Kabbalah the main role of language consists rather in bringing down divine power for either magical and mystical purposes.

### 3. R. 'Ovadiah the Prophet and the Theosophical Model

An unknown author, named R. 'Ovadiah the prophet, who was apparently a contemporary of Aharon Berakhiah of Modena, has preserved an unique vision of the infant experiment. In one of his glosses on the commentary of Rashi, the famous eleventh-century commentator, he relates the following story:

I heard from my teacher that once the king Ben Hadad<sup>80</sup> asked the sages of Israel: how do you know whether the the holy language is the best language and the first<sup>81</sup> of [all] the languages, and that in heaven this language is spoken? They answered him: take two babies from the day they are born and appoint over them someone to ensure that no one will speak any language to them, even the holy language, until the age of seven. It is at this age that the understanding comes to the child, so that he is capable of understanding all things. And see that they only speak the holy language from this time on. And the king did this: he took two Israelite infants on the [very] day they were born and [as they were] males, [he] circumcised [them], and he took also a female

<sup>80</sup> Probably the biblical figure that was a king of Aram. See, for example, *Kings* I, 20:1. I did not find any additional connection between this king and the question of language.

<sup>81</sup> *R'osh*. See note 7.

[infant]. He placed them in a dark house and he alone gave them food and drink, and he did not speak with them at all, as the sages recommended. The sages had told him to take Isrealite children and to circumcise the males. And the king did not speak with them nor use the holy language until seven years had passed. Then he took them from this chamber and spoke to them in the holy language and the children answered all this questions in the holy language, and they did not understand any other language. And my teacher told me that this is exactly what happens at the end of the seven years because at this time the *sefirah* of *Binah* presides over man. The king also took two uncircumcised, non-Jewish children and did not circumcise them, and he placed them [in the house]. The male could not speak but made signs with his hands like a mute person until he was taught to speak. But the female spoke in the holy language. And whoever has brains in his head will understand this [namely the topic just discussed] according to his intelligence: that the Holy One, blessed be He, has given to man a rank higher than that of the animals and beasts, which [consists of] the faculty of speech. Even if he stays closed in darkness, separated from other humans, the speaking faculty is not separated [namely divorced] from him. The fact that the non-circumcised child did not speak was a miracle due to the fact that he was not circumcised.<sup>82</sup>

Many formulations in this passage are quite awkward in the Hebrew original, and the logic of the discourse is not always evident. Nevertheless, it is conspicuous that unlike all the former discussions, R. 'Ovadia the prophet – or perhaps his anonymous teacher – was oriented to a more particularistic understanding of the actualization of language. Circumcision is conceived of as the *sine qua non* for the independent attainment of speech. Precisely how this operation prepares the infant to know Hebrew is far from clear. However, traditions exist that consider circumcision a means of inscribing the divine name on the penis or, according to another tradition, on the body of man in general. In light of these traditions, we may assume that the divine name has a special power of enabling someone to understand Hebrew. While this view is no more than an hypothesis, what appears more certain is the relationship established between the age of seven and the acquisition of wisdom: it is at this moment that the third *sefirah*, *Binah*, comes to preside over the destiny of the individual. This theological explanation presupposes a correlation between the growth of human beings and the different divine powers. Unlike the two preced-

82 Printed in Hayyim Lieberman, *'Ohel Rahel* (New York, 1980), 2: 319 f. [Hebrew].

ing models, where the ability to speak depends on human actions, here man – in our case the infant – is conditioned by supernal processes and occult sympathies and correlations.

## Conclusions

Discussions about the nature of language in general and the infant experiment in particular emerged during the twelfth century. They were part of the attempt made by Jewish intellectuals, philosophers, and Kabbalists to establish their religious and cultural identity vis-a-vis their intellectual environment, whether Muslim or Christian. Either to counteract Muslim claims about the superiority of Arabic or to refute the claims of certain Jewish thinkers that all languages, including Hebrew, are conventional, some Jewish authors strove to conceptualize the ideas expressed less articulately by many of their predecessors. The texts studied above show that two major lines of argument emerge: the first, which emphasizes phonetics as the natural and perfect language, is more universalistic. In effect, it assumes the superiority of Hebrew as the repository of the twenty-two perfect phonemes but recognizes that in terms of semantics, every word from non-Hebrew languages that can be reduced to the twenty-two letters has a certain meaning, even if it is unknown. Although conferring a paramount role to the oral dimension of Hebrew, this approach cannot be seen as a simple claim to the superiority on the part of the Jews who knew this language since most of them did not resort to Hebrew as a vernacular but as a written language. This is most evident in a passage of Abraham Abulafia himself, one of the major proponents of the phonetic theory.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, the semantic approach is much more particularistic: not only are the phonemes conceived of as natural but entire Hebrew words as well, either because of their divine promulgation or because of their "natural" ability to express the essences of things.

The major motivation for the above discussions was not the desire to discover the "alphabet of nature," namely an attempt to understand the cosmic order by decoding the imprint or the signature of the di-

83 Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 25.



vine language, but an interest in the human aspect of language. For many of the Christian thinkers concerned with the question of the first language, a connection existed between the primordality of a language and its naturalness. In contrast, the Jews were more concerned with human nature inasmuch as man was considered first and foremost a speaking being. The story of the infant experiment emphasizes the inner nature of the child rather than external nature. This is explained by the more inward orientation of those Jewish thinkers who speculated about the nature of language. Whether they took a more universalistic or particularistic approach, nature remains at the margin of their discussions about language. This distinction is already discernible in the thirteenth century when we compare the Abulafian use of the combinations of letters for the sake of attaining a prophetic experience with that of Ramon Lull, who is much more concerned with the discovery of theological or natural truths.<sup>84</sup> While the passage of R. Aharon Berakhiah does expand the scope of the discussion of the infant ordeal to nature, this extension emphasizes the affinity between nature and Torah. While in European thought the search for the perfect and primordial language was connected to the idea of a global and natural philosophy, among Jews the search was more concerned with validating the sacred text. For Christian thinkers, as well as some Jewish thinkers, the perfect language was one which would allow them to express their thoughts most clearly. In Jewish texts, however, especially Kabbalistic sources, words were viewed more as a means of attracting divine influence or, alternatively, as keys for interpreting the divine message inscribed in the Bible.

To the extent that we know the biographies of the above authors, they were connected in one way or another to Italy. This is true not only in the case of Herodotus and Salimbene, but also in the case of Abraham ibn Ezra, Hillel, Zerahiah, Abraham Abulafia, and Aharon Berakhiah. Is this more than coincidental? Or, to put it another way: why did such a story not draw the attention of Jewish authors outside Italy? The following answer may be pure speculation, but in my opinion the connection with Italy reveals a certain facet of Jewish culture. If we assume that the significant sources which influenced the Jews

84 Compare Eco, *La ricerca* [note 19 above], pp. 61 – 81.

were composed in Italy – and this seems to be the case for the versions of Herodotus and Salimbene – then the Jewish authors dealt with here borrowed the story from this Latin culture, but they gave it a special twist. This is already obvious in ibn Ezra. Unlike their Spanish contemporaries, the Italian Jews of the thirteenth century were more open to their Christian environment and to Christian thought, a fact that is especially evident in the case of R. Hillel of Verona.<sup>85</sup> Both in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance cooperation between Jewish and Christian scholars was much more evident in Italy than anywhere else in Europe.

One last statistical fact needs to be mentioned: though the story of the infant ordeal started its career with the pagan Herodotus and subsequently becomes associated with the name of the Christian Frederick II, it appears that there are more versions of the story in Hebrew than in Latin. Taking into account the fact that the corpus of medieval Latin literature is vastly greater than the comparable Hebrew corpus, the greater concern with the meaning of the experiment among Jews is perhaps not without significance for a history of both Jewish and Christian culture. Statistically speaking Jewish authors were more interested in the infant story than Christian ones, even if the latter also often subscribed to the priority of Hebrew. This leads to the conclusion that while the Jews were more interested in proving the priority of their language, Christian thinkers were more concerned with concepts related to the perfection of language.<sup>86</sup>

85 See Shlomo Pines, "Medieval Doctrines in Renaissance Garb? Some Jewish and Arabic Sources of Leone Ebreo's Doctrines", in B. D. Cooperman, ed., *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 390.

86 Yehudah Rosenthal points out that a similar experiment to that of Frederick II was attributed to the English King James II, but he does not provide a precise reference for this information. See *Mehqarim u-Meqorot* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1967), 1:217, n. 13 [Hebrew].